

Public School # 15
75 Herkimer Street
Albany
Albany County
New York

HABS No. NY-5707

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HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PUBLIC SCHOOL # 15
(School 15)HABS No. NY-5707
(Page 1)

Location: 75 Herkimer Street, Albany, Albany County, New York.

USGS Albany Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 18.602160.4721910

Present Owner: City of Albany, New York.

Present Occupant and Use: Demolished in 1980 following severe damage by fire on February 5, 1980.

Significance: The school was an excellent example of advanced design for its purpose at the time it was built. It was a landmark building in the history of education in Albany, and its classroom arrangement marked "a new era in the history of school architecture in this city." (See B. Historical Context, below.) The building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Pastures Preservation Historic District on March 16, 1972.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1870-1871.
2. Architect: Ogden & Wright, an Albany firm headed by Edward Ogden.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Albany Board of Education purchased the lot on the southeast corner of Herkimer and Franklin Streets in August of 1870 for \$16,474 and directed that four old brick houses on the site be cleared away. The City of Albany still held title to the property in 1980.
4. Builder, contractors, suppliers: John G. Treadwell supervised the construction. Martin White was the masonry contractor, and the carpentry contract was awarded to Clemshire & Bryce. The heating system was apparently supplied by Lewis W. Leeds.
5. Alterations and additions: The first major renovation occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. The cast iron roof cresting was then removed, and the third-floor wooden cornices and dormers were sheathed in sheet metal. Wooden modillions, rosettes, and simulated applied molded panels were also removed. The large third-floor room was subdivided into smaller rooms and hallways. The skylight may have been added at that time. The slated boards on all levels were covered with $\frac{1}{2}$ "-thick red slate.

During a second renovation at mid-century the two main staircases were replaced with fire-resistant steel and concrete stairs. A ladder was added to the attic, and the attic was insulated. A third

and larger chimney was constructed as part of a new heating system.

In the summer of 1979 the Albany Urban Renewal Agency contracted to stabilize and weather-proof the building, which had stood vacant for some time, in order to prevent further decay. After the initial phase of stabilization was underway, a fire destroyed the upper third of the building and caused considerable water damage and construction problems throughout the remaining areas of the building. Following the fire of February 5, 1980, demolition was permitted.

B. Historical Context:

The history of School 15 began in 1868, when the Albany Board of Education first discussed proposals for erecting a new grammar school to accommodate pupils from School 4 on Union Street and School 9 at the corner of South Ferry Street and Dongan Avenue.¹ After the Common Council allocated \$70,000 for the new building in the school budget in the fall of 1869, the Board asked its Committee on Construction and Repairs to recommend a suitable site "at as early a date as practicable."²

The Committee examined the area between Hamilton and Ferry Streets and between South Pearl and Green Streets. The area east of Green Street was considered undesirable because it was not "beyond the reach of high water, to which this part of the city is liable every spring and fall."³ After noting that it had been difficult to locate unimproved property in that vicinity, the Committee recommended that a lot on the corner of Herkimer and Franklin Streets be chosen. Accordingly, in August 1870 the Board purchased the lot at a cost of \$16,474 and directed that the materials from the "four old brick dwellings on the property"⁴ be disposed of in a manner advantageous to the Board and the city.

The Committee was very concerned that the new building embody, in their words, "all the essential features of the best models of modern school architecture, combining beauty with utility."⁵ With that objective in mind, the Committee visited new school buildings in New York and Boston, accompanied by the Albany architect Edward Ogden. The Committee considered the arrangement of New York schools, consisting of a large hall for recitation surrounded by small classrooms, to be "an unnecessary waste of valuable room required to meet the school wants of a dense population."⁶

In Boston, however, the Committee visited a recently completed building, the Shurtliff Grammar School, which was to become the model for School 15. The Committee was particularly enthusiastic about the general plan of Shurtliff, which was composed of classrooms that were under the direction of a single teacher who supervised both recitation and study. The Committee felt that the advantage of this plan would be to insure each instructor's "individual responsibility for results in teaching."⁷

The Committee also endorsed many other features of the Shurtliff School which were incorporated into the design of School 15, including "slated black boards" instead of slabs of slate, a high basement containing recreation rooms to be used during warm of otherwise inclement weather, a supply of drinking water in each hall, and speaking tubes connecting each classroom with the principal's office. The Committee also praised the Georgia pine flooring, the oiled wooden wainscoting, and the "hard-finished" walls which through their lack of paint and wallpaper required minimal maintenance.

In March 1870 the Board authorized the architectural firm of Ogden & Wright, which had designed other schools in Albany, to prepare plans and specifications for School 15, following the general arrangement of the Boston school. On August 24 the Board approved the plans, and five days later the excavation for the foundations was begun.

The Board was especially concerned with the heating and ventilation of the building, noting that "inno building is thorough and complete ventilation so desirable as in a public school."⁸ The Board directed John C. Treadwell, who was supervising the construction of the building, to examine several low pressure steam heating systems which had been designed by Lewis W. Leeds and installed in buildings in New York and New Jersey. Subsequently, Treadwell recommended that a similar system be used in School 15, commenting that "when we consider the question of the health of the pupils, a trifling expense should not stand in the way of adopting a plan commensurate with the enlightenment of scientific men of our day."⁹ The detailed discussion of the heating system presented at the dedication of School 15 suggests that steam heating was somewhat unusual in Albany at that time.

Bids for the masonry and carpentry work were opened in late September 1870 and were awarded respectively to Martin White and Clemshire & Bryce. The Board directed that the building be enclosed by January 1, 1871, but when workmen refused to sign contracts under that condition, the Board advanced the date to February 15. On August 29, 1871, the building was dedicated, exactly a year after excavation had been started.

Prior to the opening ceremonies, the Albany Argus published a lengthy article on the building which included a description of the exterior of the building and grounds:

That portion of the lot not occupied by the building is set apart for recreation purposes, and has been properly graded and paved with the "Scrimshaw pavement" [a patent concrete pavement] and presents a very clean appearance.

The girls' portion, which is on Herkimer street, contains about three thousand square feet. The boys' playground is on Franklin street and contains 4,830 feet, and is separated from the girls' ground by a strong fence nine feet high.

In each of these play grounds are the necessary privies, urinals, &c., all of brick, with floors of flag-stone, and proper screens in front to secure privacy.

The exterior of the building, which is both imposing and pleasing, is constructed of the following materials: The water-table and lintel course of the basement in Grawacke stone; the trimmings and belt course to first and second story windows are of cast iron; the main cornice and dormer windows are of wood and are very ornamental. The French roof is covered with slate banded in two colors, while the roof is surmounted with a neat cornice and ornamental iron cresting. The wood and iron work is painted and sanded to imitate the stone.¹⁰

School 15 is a landmark building in the history of education in Albany. At the time of the building's opening, the Board of Education noted that the new classroom arrangement marked "a new era in the history of school architecture in this city. It differs essentially in plan and arrangement from any heretofore erected."¹¹ To varying degrees Schools 11, 20, 22, and 23 were modeled after School 15. The Board also hoped that the erection of School 15 would initiate a new era in public education, as the President of the Board explained at the dedication:

Although composed of wood and brick, and stone and mortar, it has a voice, and speaks of better times to come, of a future, when all will have the means of education furnished them, without money and without price; when class distinctions in acquiring knowledge will be known only in history, and when the humblest member in this State will be trained to discharge intelligently and wise such duties as may be imposed upon him.¹²

The architectural character of School 15 reflects its educational significance. Like the innovative, modern tracing arrangement it housed, the building was designed in the high style of the early 1870s. The massive scale and bold detailing imparted to the building a monumentality in keeping with the status of the new system of public education sheltered within.

Set apart from surrounding structures by the playground space, School 15 was an important focal point in the neighborhood, dominating the neighboring residences and commercial buildings. It was one of the few remaining large scale, nineteenth century public buildings in the South End.

Designed by the well-known Albany architectural firm of Ogden & Wright, the building was architecturally an impressive example of its period. From its handsome iron fence to its elegant Mansard roof, School 15 stood as a testament to the pride and concern of the city in providing facilities for quality education a century ago.

Footnotes:

1. After School 15 was opened, Schools 4 and 9, both of which had been constructed in 1838, became primary schools.
2. Albany Board of Education, Proceedings, II (December 6, 1869), p. 97.
3. Ibid., III (August 24, 1871), p. 51.
4. Ibid., II (January 13, 1870), p. 112.
5. Ibid., III (August 24, 1871), p. 51.
6. Ibid., II (April 4, 1870), p. 164.
7. Ibid., p. 162.
8. Ibid., III (August 24, 1871), p. 53.
9. Ibid., II (October 31, 1870), p. 277.
10. Albany Argus, August 29, 1871, p. 4.
11. Ibid., August 30, 1871, p. 4.
12. Ibid.

Bibliography:

Albany Argus, August 29 and 30, 1871.

Albany. Board of Education. Proceedings. Vol. II, III, IV.

The Public Schools of Albany. [Albany?: Board of Education?], 1894.

NOTE: The historical data are quoted almost verbatim from the following source:

Waite, Diana, "Developmental History of the Pastures." Prepared for the Albany Urban Renewal Agency, 1972-1973.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Public School # 15 in Albany was a dignified and imposing mansard-crowned symmetrical brick structure designed in an American somewhat simplified paraphrase of the French Second Empire manner. It embodied very advanced pedagogical planning for its time and place.
2. Condition of fabric: Demolished.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The building was $2\frac{1}{2}$ stories high above a full basement. It measured approximately 94' (7-bay front) x 98' (6-bay flanks) over-all. Each wall had a central pavilion (3-bays on front and rear and two-bays on each flank) that projected about 7'.
2. Foundations: Foundations were brick and stone with a water table of Grawacke stone.
3. Walls: Walls were yellow brick with cast iron trim.
4. Structural system, framing: Brick bearing walls with wooden floors and roof framing.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: The arched front (north) and rear entrances were slightly recessed. There were metal fire escapes extending to the third (top) floor on the east and west sides of the building. That on the west side extended around the corner onto part of the north front. The rear (south) wall had a small fire escape leading from the westernmost first-floor window. All fire escapes were additions to the building.
6. Chimneys: There were two square brick interior chimneys west of the center of the roof.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Tall archways led to the slightly recessed front and rear entrances. The archways were headed by semicircular arches with keystones and simple spandrel panels, above which were friezes labeled PUBLIC SCHOOL No. 15, and molded cornices with arched centers containing the date 1870. Those ensembles were apparently cast iron. The wooden doors were paired and set below large glazed transoms. They were paired, each leaf having two horizontal panels below a vertical rectangular light protected by wire mesh of late date.

- b. Windows: The basement windows were rectangular. The first-floor windows had segmental heads, and the second-floor windows had semicircular heads. The windows of both floors were set above single horizontal panels and had cast-iron lintels. The windows above the entrances lighted the stairways. They were paired, separated by a paneled mullion, ran through two levels, and had paired semicircular heads below a segmental arch. The classroom windows had wooden double-hung six-over-six-light sash.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The roof was a steep-sided Mansard without curvature, its sides covered by five zones of imbricated gray slates alternating with four zones of square yellow slates.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The original wooden brackets and frieze panels had been removed, and the wooden cornice had been sheathed in molded sheet metal ca. 1900. The original cast-iron cresting had been removed at the same time. The eaves had concealed trough gutters.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There was a dormer over each window stack below. The front and rear pavilion roofs rose higher than the rest of the Mansard, forming low tower motifs. They contained segmental-headed dormers and, in their uppermost zone, heavily framed oculi. The other dormers were flat-topped. All had been metal-sheathed.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The high basement originally contained recreation space. North and south stairways at the front and rear entrances connected the three classroom floors, the third of which was in the Mansard. Between the stairways were very wide first and second-floor hallways flanked on the east and west by three classrooms. The corner rooms were about 24' square, the middle rooms about 7' longer. The central hall of the third floor had been subdivided into smaller rooms and hallways..
- 2. Stairways: The two original wooden stairways had been replaced by steel and concrete stairways around 1950.
- 3. Flooring: Flooring was wooden on wooden joists.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls had tongue-and-groove match-board dados. Classrooms had a blackboard zone sheathed with slate above the dado. Upper walls and ceilings were plastered.
- 5. Openings: Interior doorways were rectangular with glazed transoms and molded wooden architraves.

6. Hardware: There were ornamental cast-iron ventilating registers on various walls.
 7. Mechanical equipment: The original heating was by low pressure steam on the system devised by Lewis W. Leeds. The last system was installed around 1950.
- D. Site: The building occupied a site at the southeast corner of Herkimer and Franklin Streets in a residential and commercial neighborhood that was slated for urban renewal. The school yard was paved. Originally it was divided by a 9'-high wall into girls' and boys' playgrounds, each containing outside privies.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

O'Connor, Sheridan Marsh. "Public School 15 Status Report." (copy in field material.)

Waite, Diana. "Developmental History of the Pastures." Prepared for Albany Urban Renewal Agency, 1972-1973.

2. Secondary and published sources:

See page 5 above.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Albany Urban Renewal Agency in compliance with Executive Order 11593 and a Memorandum of Agreement with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation as a mitigative effort in the proposed clearance of the site subsequent to extensive fire damage to the structure. John A. Burns, AIA, was the Historic American Buildings Survey coordinator. The records were edited and prepared for transmittal to the Library of Congress by HABS architectural historian Denys Peter Myers.